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ABSTRACT

Sixty-five students in an undergraduate reading class wrote narratives on literacy life experiences from oral history tapes collected from interviews. Students interviewed middle and high school-level reluctant readers. In classroom workshops, the college students brainstormed about how to conduct the interviews and write the narratives. In later class sessions, they edited their drafts. The teacher prepared field notes of workshops and submitted them to students for revision. It become clear that the workshop setting can help students learn to: (1) navigate personal boundaries through writing; (2) improve writing through the pressure of collaboration; (3) edit; (4) turn feelings into more effective writing; (5) overcome fears about writing; (6) deal with frustrations; (7) build bridges to the potential audience; and (8) reexamine their views of themselves as writers. Comments from several student writers serve to illustrate their growth through writing. Those interested in concepts about quality schools should consider incorporating collaborative oral-history narrative workshops into the curriculum. (Nineteen references are attached.) (SG)

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The Oral History Curriculum Issue: A Step Toward Quality Schools

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The Oral History Curriculum Issue: A Step Toward Quality Schools

The argument has essentially been that an effective step toward quality schools would be to make changes in the curriculum. Glasser (1990) suggests a huge restructuring of basic educational practice based on control theory and managed by lead managers (p.103), i.e. teachers. Glasser goes on to acknowledge there are many details that must be worked out. This paper addresses one such detail; an alternate teaching model supported by critical ethnography (Anderson, 1989), and delineated as a collaborative oral-history writer's workshop (Wigginton 1987). The concept of critical ethnography theory suggests a writing context that allows writers to change their writing, but does not expect to measure writing progress as a function of the amount of change (Elbow, 1981). Instead, the value of the writing workshop as a teaching effort is measured in perceived opportunities for writers to change their writing (Graves, 1983).

Thus, this paper presents a critical proposal to teachers (lead managers) as they search for ways to create a classroom context that allows students to become more effective writers by writing about life-experiences and exchanging ideas about their writing. This approach allows teachers to reinvent instructional methodology and strengthen their position against external challenges to their expertise in the classroom.

This paper is divided into four parts. First, the paper describes the circumstances surrounding the workshops. Second, the paper explains how the data were collected, triangulated, and analyzed. Third, the paper looks at ways this model helped college reading students become more effective writers. The paper concludes with a discussion of the place of the writer's workshop in the curriculum of a quality school.

Circumstances of the workshops

These workshops were held in 1991 on a college campus in a southern state. Sixty-five undergraduates in a reading class wrote narratives on literacy life-experiences from oral history tapes (Ives, 1987) collected during interviews with self-selected respondents. The students interviewed middle and high school reluctant-readers. Judy interviewed Tommy, a middle school, self-described non-reader. Libby interviewed Martha, a high school student and product of elementary school remedial programs. These two examples characterize the remaining interviews.

The college students discussed several items pertaining to the interviews during the first workshop meeting. They learned how to use a tape recorder. They brainstormed about questions to get the interviews started and decided to allow other questions to emerge during the interview. They also discussed several steps to start writing their narrative, such as making a transcript or listening to the tapes several times. After the students completed the interviews, they

used their interview information to write a narrative, and brought a first draft to class. They divided into groups and worked together on their narratives (Comstock, 1982). They exchanged oral readings and constructive comments until every student had an opportunity to read and receive feedback.

The students devoted the next few class period to "editing" session. The teacher participated only to the extent that when the students wanted help, they "fixed" individual writing problems in conference (Murray, 1987). The teacher offered suggestions, but always left any final decision to the students. The students used the last few workshop days to polish their draft, one last reading for typos, and then brought a final draft to the last workshop meeting where they published a monograph of their narratives.

Working with the data

The teacher recorded field notes to capture the events in the workshops (Spradley, 1980), and mailed them to four students to read, make corrections or amplifications, and return. They returned the notes with alterations which were added to the data. The teacher used a three step inductive process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze the data by reading it several times, searching in particular for what the students said concerning writing, and made rough personal notes pursuing categories. The teacher used cognitive mapping techniques to internalize existing categories, and clustering and connections techniques to refine the emerging categories (Jones, 1985). Thus, any sense made from the data

is necessarily a product of the students, and any knowledge gained was mutually constructed through the social reality of the collaborative groups. In looking at the data, at least eight categories emerged important to the idea of improving student writing. The first is that writer's workshops help students navigate personal boundaries.

Crossing boundaries

Judy, a thirty year-old, non-traditional student seeking elementary certification, did not view herself as a writer before enrolling in the reading class. "I hardly ever write. I'm not a writer." The fact Judy enrolled in college suggests she wanted to improve her life, and consequently, improve her reading and writing skills for certification. Writing was too much trouble in Judy's life before college, "It's easier to use the phone." However, she did schedule writing time during the workshop, "I'm sitting aside time to write in my journal." Conceivably, Judy found enough enjoyment in writing during the workshop to write at other times. She came to see herself more as a writer because of the writing she did in the workshop, "Writing this paper is more fun than I thought." This suggests that workshops help students like Judy cross boundaries (Rose, 1989), and see themselves more as writers.

Imposing pressure

Libby found herself sharing writing with someone other than a teacher during the workshop. The first day she did not think anyone would want to read her writing, "I write

reports for class, but who else would want to read my writing, other than a teacher?" During the workshop Libby collaborated and shared writings with peers, "This was a new experience for me. I never let anyone read my assignments before I turned them in." Collaboration compelled Libby to expand her audience beyond what she had been accustomed. As Graves (1983) points out collaboration almost always leads to a more effective writing product. "Sharing my writing gave me a keener awareness of audience. When this happened, I wanted my writing to be good. I wanted my peers to like what I wrote. It became for me much more than a writing assignment." What others had to say about Libby's writing helped her develop more interest in writing. She changed her mind and gained a certain type of new knowledge.

Learning about editing

When Tracy came to the reading class, she understood her writing process as being either right or wrong. She did not have knowledge of editing as a process to improve writing. She recognized only the extremes on the writing continuum; "right" at one extremity and "wrong" at the other. "I try to do right when I write, but I seldom get it right. I was taught in high school there is a correct and incorrect way to write. It's either correct or its not. That's just the way it is." This suggests Tracy thought her first efforts were her best efforts. However, she received editing help from peers during the workshop, "After listening to others I could see where change would improve my story." Her acceptance of

peer suggestions is not surprising. Calkins (1986) claims that students accept peer suggestions quicker than teacher suggestions. Perhaps students more readily accept peer suggestions because their personal values are not threatened.

Searching for meaning

Louise brought to the workshop an understanding that her feelings about writing played a determinate role in differentiating effective and non-effective writing. Writing with feeling produced more effective writing, "If it does not have my feelings in it, then to me, it's not 'real writing.'" Louise wrote with feeling, but had trouble transferring meaning in her writing to peers. She directed first efforts toward herself, but only she understood parts of her narrative. Louise learned during collaboration that others did not understand her writing. Her narrative did evolve during editing, however, to a point where peers better understood. As Atwell (1987) points out, understanding plays a positive role in students' acceptance that meaning in writing is as important as content. The workshop did not change Louise's attitude about feelings, but it did help her understand she could turn feelings into more effective writing through collaboration and editing when she discussed feelings with peers.

Handling peer criticism

Trudy was not ready for criticism, and did not want to rewrite her paper. "Writing is such a trauma. Write, criticize, rewrite, etc. It really seems like more work than

it's worth. I don't want to write anymore. Give me a science experiment or math problem any day. At least with them one knows when they have finished, and usually if it's right." Trudy's pain increased as the editing process continued. "Today, I received some constructive criticism. However, while watching her dissect my paper, I felt pain. As she wrote, the pain increased." Trudy's feelings spring from the writing knowledge she brought to the workshop. Yet, the criticism changed her writing perspective. At first, she thought writing was an exclusive process, but during the workshop, came to know that easy writing is not self-rewarding. In the end, Trudy realized the truth in Murray's (1987) statement that effective writing is hard work and requires more effort than ineffective writers are willing to put forth. "As I evaluate this, I realize that to be criticized is painful, but necessary."

Writing is scarey

The more students made decisions about what they were doing, the more they were motivated to continue their efforts. Nelda would not write at first. She had the desire to write, had written effectively in her private journals, but became frustrated with her inability to produce writing for peers. "I've been writing since my marriage broke down. I used to sit in my Ozark cabin all by my lonesome and write my heart out. Now, I have trouble. I guess I can't write." The terror of writing affects people in different ways. Because writing is probably students'

most disciplined form of thinking (Rose, 1989), it follows that how they think scares them and effects their way of writing. In Nelda's case, her fear of a "writing block" objectifies an internal psychological response into something real. The inability to produce words was very important and production equaled success. She used the tape recordings as a catalysis to help produce words with the encouragement of peers. At the end, Nelda had produced a final draft and progressed through what Atchity (1986) calls "a translated experience."

Writing is frustrating

Anita is typical that she does not often employ writing in daily activities. She can write if writing is generously enough defined. During the workshop, she did not understand her feeling of frustration or dissatisfaction after writing, "I would write more if what I wrote made any sense. I get so frustrated when I read what I write. I'm ashamed to let anyone else read it." Since Gould (1989) claims that we will write only if we find self-value in it, Anita's beginning writing efforts were directed toward self-value; she was not satisfied with product. When she began to respond to peer-comment, she opened herself to a message that she could go beyond a mere writing of individual words, and began to perceive meaning in her writing.

Building bridges

The students brought a final written narrative of the oral interviews and bound them in book form on the last

workshop meeting. Alice shares her feelings about this transition. "Since I was a little girl, writing is something I always wanted to do, but I thought I never had the talent for it. Being able to write a story and see it in print is really exciting." In these sentences, Alice reawakens a feeling of implicit and joyous anticipation she missed for a long time. "Although I felt I knew it by heart after all the editing, I slowly read each line. It may sound silly, but my first thought was 'I can't wait to show it to mom.'" Clearly, Alice felt renewed, that effective writing made her feel better. She used an awareness of a potential audience to shake up her generative, critical, and expressive capabilities simultaneously, therefore extending psychological growth through writing.

A step toward quality

These workshops support Wigginton's (1987) claim that oral-history workshops will change the way students view "what is writing." Many students did not write much, were seldom around others who did, and did not think they were good writers before the workshops. What they remembered about public school writing instruction influenced their prior knowledge. For example, the ineffective writers seemed to think writing is a one-time process. The collaborative process changed their minds about this and helped them realize that effective writing is not necessarily a one-time process.

Other students brought adverse concepts about themselves as writers. They did not think they were or could be effective writers. These workshops helped ineffective writers change their attitudes toward writing. The collaboration process seems to have had a metamorphosis effect on their feelings and attitudes toward writing.

These workshops also support Vygosky's (1978) theory that one learns from another regardless of context or learning level. For example, several students learned from others different ways to transfer text meaning. They became more aware of what they were writing during collaboration because peers read their writing. Collaboration helped them to write more effectively because they wanted to impress peers. Thus, peers who applaud and positively reinforce writing enhance others to become more successful writers.

During collaboration the more experienced writers rose to the challenge and helped the less experienced writers. A sense of self pride and accomplishment in writing emerged during the collaboration, and peer collaboration was responsible for extending self knowledge about writing. Consequently, the rational, meaningful, and positive practice of writing through collaborative editing sessions should increase the quality of student writing.

In Glasser's quality schools, lead managers employing oral-history workshops will find that personal ownership in writing can be raised to a higher level when students are allowed to share their knowledge by writing about life

experiences. Thus, students at all instructional levels should be given opportunities to write personal choice stories, and share them with others in groups. In addition, lead managers will find that allowing students to write in a context that does not restrain interest in learning new ways of writing will improve the quality of writing. Although this practice is not common in today's public schools, similar efforts have proven effective in higher education (King, 1991) and non-academic situations (Phillips, 1992). These efforts should transfer quite well to elementary and middle school language arts classes, and secondary social studies classes. In closing, those interested in Glasser's quality school concepts should consider including collaborative oral-history narrative workshops in their new curriculum.

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